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NATIONAL EDUCATION.

WHAT SHOULD IT BE?

SUBMITTED TO THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE.

BY

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WHAT SHOULD IT BE?

Upon the necessity and importance of promoting an increase in the means of education in the United Kingdom, no difference of opinion can exist.

Various systems of education have been established and pursued in this country. Universities, colleges, and public and private schools offer great and most valuable advantages to those classes whose time and circumstances permit them to avail themselves of the educational benefits which may be obtained in those institutions, and which afford scientific, literary, religious, and secular teaching, according to the principles upon which they have been founded and are conducted. The existing scholastic establishments are, however, chiefly adapted to the wants of the affluent amongst us, and to others whose limited means enable them to participate in the benefits of cheap or gratuitous education of a high grade; but great multitudes of children of the indigent class are left unprovided with teaching or training; and in the midst of the refining, elevating, and highly-civilising ten-

dencies in the upper and middle ranks of society, the unfortunate offspring of the poor, being surrounded with vicious and vagrant temptations, possess little of parental sympathy, care, or training. Thus, as future heads of families and responsible members of the community, neglected children remain not only unprepared to perform the duties which devolve upon them as citizens, but, from the lack of adequate teaching, they may in reality become the pariahs of society, and instead of adding to the efficient, moral, and mental strength of the nation, they constitute the weakness of their country, and probably increase the paupers in our poorhouses, and the prisoners in our gaols. Even the union workhouses and prisons contain schools which have been there introduced for the removal of ignorance, and the prevention of that mental degradation usually attending the associations in those places; but the humble and honest workman who pays his poor-rates and other taxes, and who, in truth, is compelled to assist in giving pecuniary support towards the education of abandoned and dissolute children, is left unable to provide for his own children that boon of knowledge which he helps the less provident to procure. From prisons and poorhouses do not proceed virtuous, worthy, and large tax-paying members of society, and yet the state has expressly provided costly teaching for their inmates, whilst the poor but independent labourer, struggling with difficulties, seeks to avert the degradation that would secure education for his children from those sources. That poverty and vice should be the conditions which the state especially recognises for granting any partial plan of national education is revolting. The legislature seems almost to have tempted the poor man from independence and duty by telling him that when he has become necessitous, a rogue and a vagabond, his children shall be taught at the expense of the nation, and the great principle is disregarded, that good teaching should be

rather the preventative than the curative of error and evil. Unquestionably the nation has a direct and deep interest in the intelligence, morality, and good conduct of those of whom it consists. In this age of progress and improvement, the ignorant and unskilled can neither maintain themselves as truly beneficial members of society, nor can they contribute their share of the public burthens, and therefore, in the mere mercenary point of view, they are unproductive citizens; but, as facts and the statistics of crime prove that the untaught and neglected classes mostly supply the offenders against laws and morality, the reasons are irresistible why ignorance should be banished from our country. To illustrate the partiality of our public educational provisions, a fact may be mentioned, fraught with the deepest sympathy for the neglected, and admonitory of the vital necessity for a change in the present imperfect systems under which education amongst the very poor is rather retarded than promoted. Not long ago, in the city of Manchester, a boy was found guilty, which indeed, he pleaded, of feloniously stealing a few lead pipes, and on the court being about to pronounce judgment, he exclaimed, "Please send me to prison for five years," when he was told that he could not be heard; but he importuned and said, "I have no parents, I can neither read nor write, I know no trade, and if you send me to gaol for a short time I shall come out only to commit another theft, because I stole the pipes to be sent here; but if I can be kept in prison for five years I shall learn a trade, and be taught useful knowledge, and to be an honest man."

Looking, however, at the prostrate mental condition of the transgressors of our laws, it is evident that respect and obedience to those legal enactments cannot be obtained from the classes who are too frequently ignorant of them, and whose inability even to read what they are called upon to obey, leaves

only the alternative of punishment as the reward of ignorance. Beyond prisons and workhouses, the legislature has provided partial national education by enacting that no child under thirteen years of age shall labour in cotton, woollen, silk, flax, or printing factory, without presenting a certificate weekly to his employer of having received three hours instruction daily; and here an invidious distinction is raised between those classes of children and the other working or non-working infants of our country; but in the provisions in the education clauses of the Factories' Act no restrictive conditions are enacted touching the nature or quality of the education to be given, nor as to the inculcation of any religious principles whatever. Imperfect, partial, and devoid of prudential provisions as the factory system of education is, it has certainly been productive of beneficial results to the rising generation in manufacturing districts, and if the young in every other pursuit were equally well taught, the evils of ignorance would be less injurious than they have been proved to be. Without venturing to meet the evils of neglect in the education of the young in the whole United Kingdom by a comprehensive and liberal system of national education, our legislature has invaded all sound principles in providing partial teaching, and in delegating to the privy council the unusual authority to distribute public funds for educational objects unsanctioned by the immediate direction of parliament. Under the minutes of council strange inconsistencies are perpetrated. Religious errors are supported at the cost of the state, under the guise of education. In one excellent dissenting school in the city of Manchester, not only are the religious dogmas of the sect daily taught, but attendance at the Sunday school of the body is enforced upon the pupil teachers, whose parents desire for them only sound secular teaching, blended with the palpable truths of Christianity; and because no other school exists in the same

vicinity, this violence is done to the consciences of the pupil teachers, and this particular school obtains nearly £300 per annum from the privy council. In many cases the Scriptures are merely introduced into schools as money qualifications for the council's grants. Where the schoolmaster is required to be a religious instructor, in schools obtaining governmental aid, the duty is often performed in the most ineffectual manner, and not unfrequently he is rather seeking to qualify himself for preaching and talking, than to discharge the solid duty of enabling the children confided to his care to become useful, intelligent, and honourable members of society. Yet, with all the imperfections of the system countenanced by the minutes of the privy council, and with the direct support given to erroneous and opposing theories of religion, no doubt valuable advantages are obtained and rendered practically beneficial in the performance of the duties of life by many children from the educational aid so afforded. The Irish system is also imperfect, but still much benefit has been derived from it. Of the voluntary Sunday school plans of teaching pursued by the various religious denominations, according to their creeds and convictions, it may suffice to remark that parents send their children to Sunday schools, not, as the conductors of those schools often fondly hope, to be indoctrinated in the dogmas of their sects, and to obtain religious teaching, but the children are sent to obtain such general knowledge and acquirements as may be useful to them in working their way through life.

To remark upon the high and multifarious systems of education bestowed in our universities, grammar and private schools, is uncalled for, because these exist to teach the ignorant rich, and not to enlighten the ignorant poor. Well did the *Times* recently write upon this vital subject, and upon the governmental plan of education—"If it can be called 'a plan,' it has all the defects

of a usurpation. It only spreads where it is received; for its reception it requires not only good will, but wealth. The Gospel was preached to the poor, but parliament only educates those who can afford partly to educate themselves. We give light to the enlightened, and leave the blind in total darkness. The thousands that swarm in the streets of our great cities, and the other thousands that are early absorbed in hard labour, we leave to take care of themselves." Such, therefore, are the provisions, public and private, for imparting knowledge to the children of the greatest nation upon earth.

In Prussia the children under teaching are 1 in every 6 of the whole inhabitants, the United States 1 in 5, whilst in Great Britain they are only 1 in 9.

Under these circumstances, what is the duty of the intelligent portion of the people of this country and of the legislature. Ignorance is certainly the bane of the age. Great mental achievements and vigour characterise great numbers of well-educated individuals, but lamentable ignorance renders unproductive to themselves and to the nation, multitudes who, if wisely taught, would obtain the means of comfort, and become worthy members of the community, contributing to the resources of their country, and increasing the shoulders of those who sustain the nation's burthens of taxes and duties. What can be done? The state has tried to enforce uniform opinions upon religion, and has failed. The state confided the teaching of the young to its established clergy, but many parents and children have recoiled from any universal domination of religious and secular teaching. The dissenting bodies, like the Established Church, have not generally succeeded in allaying religious teaching with the teaching of useful knowledge, and no system, yet acted upon, has kept in subjection that morally and mentally ruinous ignorance which now devastates an exten-

sive portion of the poorer families of the United Kingdom. Even in those ancient seats of learning, our universities, the final tests of religious opinions have been abandoned in granting common degrees. The factory education law has provided for no religious teaching. If we look to the practice in private families of affluence, we find that usually the best masters are procured to implant the great and good principles of universal knowledge in the minds of the young, irrespective of religious opinions. Very seriously has the religious element retarded the progress of general and public education in this country; but now the time seems to have arrived when ignorance must be diminished or removed, that it may no longer impede the intellectual progress of the people of our country, nor remain the costly charge which it now is upon the resources of the tax-paying and state-supporting subjects of the realm. More schools are needed, not only that fewer may be the encroachments of prisons and poorhouses, but that the beauties of truth and of knowledge may solace the humble labourer, and enable him to surmount all those difficulties of life with which he almost always has to struggle and contend. Seeing, then, that the existing teaching systems and institutions of our country have not banished ignorance, and that neither public nor private benevolence has amply provided for the removal of this great grievance of ignorance; and also seeing that the state has the deepest interest in the welfare of all its people, in their morality and intelligence, and in all their social virtues, can any other deduction be arrived at than that a national system of education, with a responsible minister of public instruction, who shall be accountable to and have a seat in parliament, should be called into existence.

No wise man, no good man, desires to see the beneficial and beautiful truths of our common Christianity withheld from the

people of this or any other country; but, after the enumerated difficulties which exist in forming an allied religious and secular system of public teaching for the young, would it not be just, prudent, and expedient, to provide for the people of this country a system that would retain to the clergy of all denominations the whole of the religious teaching of the age, requiring the state to provide only that secular knowledge in which it has a direct and material interest. The mere schoolmaster, generally, can only be an imperfect teacher of religion, and to place him in that position is to trench upon the duties of the clergy ; but the latter, as if they had not confidence in themselves, and as if they did not possess the confidence of parliament in the performance of their special duties, call upon the former to impart that religious knowledge for which he is seldom qualified. If the theory of imparting religious instruction in schools by the retention only of the Bible as a class-book be continued, one of the great existing evils would be perpetuated, doctrinal truths would be ignored, and only a vague religious knowledge would be the result, leaving to the scholar, without adequate religious teaching, no evidence of the truth within him. Indeed, it is seriously feared that the delegation of religious instruction to incompetent schoolmasters has been prejudicial to the well-grounding of the young, and of their due attainment in those divine truths which it can only be the proper duty of either the parent or the clergy to impart. An improved and national system of education ought, therefore, to be conceded as indispensable ; and the questions arise, what shall be the system, and what can it be ? Respect for the opinions of all, and justice to all the contributors to the public revenue, whether national or municipal, out of which must be paid the cost of any general system of education, reply that a practical plan should be established, doing violence to no conscience, but providing a remedy for the benefit of the

young, and without detriment to any section of the religious community. For the state to provide religious instruction for all would be alike unjust and impossible ; consequently the religious teachers and the parents of children must be responsible for their religious training ; and in this great and necessary duty to the rising generation, the rich laymen of every class need only to be appealed to by their clergy to contribute more extensive means for the diffusion of religious truths in accordance with the convictions of the several religious communities. Should not, then, the state establish a system of teaching, for every denomination of children, the secular portion of which education it should only authorise to be paid for out of public rates, and leave the various religious bodies to supplement such a system by providing the more sacred instruction which they wish to inculcate. Under the Factory Act, children can only be employed by possessing two certificates—one from a surgeon for physical capability, and the other from a schoolmaster verifying attendance at school; and if the legislature wished to secure the performance of the duty of religious teaching, how easy would it be to follow the precedent in factories, and require a certificate, weekly or monthly, of religious instruction having been imparted to each child attending a free public secular school. If the cost of the secular portion of public instruction only were provided out of a national or municipal treasury, every man might support his conscientious and religious convictions of truth, without being required to pay for, in his own opinion at least, his neighbour's error. Let no alarmist fear that this would be a godless system of education. Guarded by parliament, and guided in its administration by patriotic and faithful men, it would, with the supplemented duties of the clergy of every creed, become a blessing under Providence to the existing and future children of this favoured land.

In harmony with these views, there has been established in Manchester the National Public School Association, the object of which is, as set forth, "to promote the establishment by law in England and Wales of a system of free schools, which, supported by local rates, and managed by local committees, specially elected for the purpose by the ratepayers, shall impart secular instruction only, leaving to parents, guardians, and religious teachers the inculcation of doctrinal religion; and to afford opportunities for which the schools shall be closed at certain stated times in each week." This proposition has obtained the warmest approval of many influential communities, and especially in the great cities and towns of the kingdom has it been cordially supported. A petition in its favour, signed by 61,700 intelligent male adults in Manchester, was presented to parliament. To test the practicability of the important principle thus propounded, a specimen or model school was established in 1854. This school is perfectly free, and has perfectly succeeded. Reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, and general useful knowledge are taught, and the attainments of the scholars are truly wonderful. Many of these children have been "as brands snatched from the burning," and probably near a thousand of them, all from the necessitous classes, have received the rudiments of education, which will contribute to their own beneficial usefulness and to the good of the community. 350 children are usually on the books and in the course of instruction, 92 per cent of which having regularly attended. It has been most gratifying to find that 90 per cent of the children attending this school have also attended Sunday schools, and have otherwise received religious teaching. The cost of this scholastic establishment, including salaries, rent, and every expenditure, is about £450 per annum, or 26s. per head for each scholar. The master's report of the progress of his pupils, and other most interesting details, are in existence to

prove the benefits which many wretched and destitute children have derived from attending this experimental school. None but the best elementary books have been introduced into it, the best selections having been made from the Irish, Chambers's, and other courses; and the remark may be offered here, that to the honour of all writers of books of instruction for the young, they have with common and singular propriety scarcely produced a work that cannot with safety be placed in the hands of the most ignorant. Triumphant as the practical and now proved advantages of this school are, the privy council has withheld all pecuniary and other support and countenance from it, though a simulated assent to certain prescribed forms would have procured the needed aid; hence, not only is a great, sound, and beneficial principle stultified, but the very honesty of its advocates has been insulted for the omission of an assumed and impracticable sanctity.

Many eminent men have avowed the necessity of separating religious and secular teaching into two distinct duties, and after witnessing the benefits arising from such a system in America, Lord Elgin, at Glasgow, in January, 1857, said that "education in Canada was equal to that in Massachusetts. Elementary education was there free of cost, attainable by every child in the community, and on conditions which do no violence to any principle. Every child might go on the same terms to the higher school, and thence to the university." And then, his lordship exclaimed, "If we can get all these advantages by going to Canada, why cannot we get them without going to Canada?"

A wise legislature will decree that the teachers of sacred things shall be sacred men; whilst for the artistic and material duties of life the man whose labours conduce to his own worldly weal or woe, and whose knowledge, or ignorance, of common industrial duties leads to honourable rewards, or to

degradation, shall be provided with the means of acquiring an ordinary education. The patriotic and enlightened statesman will provide for the material wants and honour of his country; he will develop every latent and hidden power which can promote universal peace and prosperity, and he will not withhold from the young of his nation that knowledge which, as a mental implement of inestimable value, shall enable its possessor to work his way through life,—to become a profitable contributor to the stores in the general hive of industry, and to place himself among the independent and virtuous subjects of a great empire.

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